

With All Your Heart
“Imitating”
Genesis 15:1-12
Second Sunday of Lent
March 17, 2019
Pastor Dea Sharp, Pikes Peak UMC

Genesis 15:1-12 (NRSV) God’s Covenant with Abram

15 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” **2** But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”^[a]**3** And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” **4** But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” **5** He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” **6** And he believed the LORD; and the LORD^[b] reckoned it to him as righteousness. **7** Then he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.” **8** But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” **9** He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” **10** He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. **11** And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. **12** As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him.

By rough estimations (in the American counting system) there are one SEPTILLION stars. That’s a 1, a comma, and TWENTY-FOUR zeroes behind it.

And could we ever REALLY be sure? Admittedly, THAT NUMBER is probably waaaaaayyyyyyy off.

A number of THAT size just is out of my brain’s capacity to “get.”

How many stars are there?

That question probably does baffle even the most intelligent 21st century scientist – let alone an old man having a conversation with God.

Abram, and not for the first time, has to be in awe of the things God is sharing with him.

Last week we talked about the generosity of God for the ancient Israelites coming back from Egypt and getting ready to enter the Promised Land. God’s provision had kept them safe (though we have to admit oppressed) in Egypt

AND in the 40 years of wandering in the desert. They had food and water and all that God *knew* they needed. Just like God *knew* WE NEEDED a savior, long before we knew.

This week we're turning our attention upward to imitate Abram (he'll come to be known as Abraham,) who turned HIS attention to our Creator, the source of our promises and the One who guides us on our Lenten journey.

It must have seemed to Abram that God's promises were as far off as we feel the stars are from us.

Far!

And Abram wants something closer...something more tangible...like the solid weight of a baby, an heir. Or a place to settle down and call home.

Abram needed more than just star-gazing!

So, we, Dear Ones, are in good company with this patriarch of faith when we have big, hard questions...when we are impatient and want to see proof that God's promises are being kept.

The other morning, still dark after the time change, I was up to feed the cat and looked out our kitchen window. The sky, after the "boom cyclone" was so clear. It was twinkling! I kinda laughed-gasped; I was kinda taken aback. There were soooooo many stars! And they were so bright! (Okay, now I know there are a SEPTILLION of them out there!)

So, as I prepared this message, and did a few Google searches and read a couple of commentaries, I learned that the stars I saw the other morning are the same stars that Abram saw when he asked God his tough questions.

They are the same stars that made the psalmist break out in song and claim that God has a name for every one of them. (Ps. 147:4)

And they are the same stars that the Magi saw when they watched *just one special star* as they were searching for a new king.

We humans are meant for stargazing!

A sweet friend, who also has a heart for the Girl Scouts, gave me a wire coat hanger and a book called Starwatch. Its subtitle says it's "the best, most comprehensive, year-round viewing guide to the night sky."

The book gives instructions to use the hanger and some plastic wrap to chart out the patterns of the stars. Then, when you hold that up and look through it, at the right time of year and height in the sky, even an inexperienced sky watcher, like me, CAN "see" the constellations amid the other SEPTILLION stars!

I need to get that stuff out again and practice this summer!

People in early civilizations looked to the sky for all sorts of answers. Humanity has marked celestial movements with enthusiasm and with fear. I'm fascinated by Stonehenge-like formations that "fit" the seasonal solistices.

Maybe those people looked into the night sky and tried to find *their place* in everything. If they could understand THIS ONE thing, then everything else would make sense, too.

What happens though, like for Abram (and us) when God and God's promises seem as far away as those stars?

What happens when a family, very much like Abram and Sarai, have been praying for a child and they ask, "O God, what will you give me? I'm still childless."

What happens when someone loses their job or their house? Their health or even their will to survive? They're past asking. They're shouting: "O God, how am I to *KNOW*, really know, that I'll ever have THAT thing?"

Too many of us know, maybe WE are the ones who know, what it feels like to wait in the dark, with urgent prayers...waiting for God's promises.

How do we keep our faith bright?

How do we keep our hearts warmed....when *all those "stars"* grow cold and dim?

Remember with me, that up until this point in God's story – starting in Genesis 12 - Abram has done WITHOUT QUESTION everything that God asked him to do.

He left his homeland and his family.

He moved forward, building altars as he went.

He made some silly and some bad decisions...all the while following God's promises that there was a land *just for him*...that there were going to be generations of descendants...a real trail of blessings.

But, in the verses that Gretchen read for us, Abram is beginning to stutter; his faith is not quite as bright as when he started out...IT'S BEEN YEARS!

Will the promises ever come to pass?

I know that's happened to me.

Has it to you?

A time in your life when we're willing UP TO A POINT to have faith...and when we're still waiting we either try to take matters into our own hands...or think God's plans are too farfetched.

And wouldn't you agree – that's the time when Satan has a heyday!
Satan plants confusion and fear...questions and downright pigheadedness.
Ever happened to you?

Well, Abram is our example to imitate.

He's been walking the model of a journey in faithfulness with God.

If we're grounded in ours, in our faith, when we begin our journey, then we too are able to trust God's promises. Abram shows us.

If we keep walking on our journey and the promises don't seem to be any nearer, then we start question things – our faith and God's faithfulness,

whether our aspirations are “worth it”; were we wrong to trust in the first place? Don’t you think Abram asked that?

It’s not a very comfortable place to be is it?
Just sitting there.
Looking at the sky that seems farther away.

But, here’s our inspiration!

This is just the very spot God has for us to grow in our faithfulness, to spur us on.

Abram had questions.
And he trusted God enough to ask them.
This was his place of growing his faithfulness.
It is in the questioning that Abram learns to trust God even more.

This Lent is our opportunity to “return to God with all our hearts.”
This is the church season when we can ask questions, pray with grateful praise, listen in our devotional time and self-examination, and have OUR hearts transformed.

Question by question – Abram’s heart was shaped into a more trusting form.
Do you have questions for God?
And are you looking to the stars for the answers? Or to God?

We know, because we have the story of God’s people to study, that God made a covenant with Abram. It was part of the reading today.
In the verses just after today’s, after Abram brought the sacrifices God told him to bring, and after Abram had fallen into a deep sleep, God told our patriarch “Know this for certain...”

Now, when you go home and re-read our lectionary verses....and then get so caught up in the story that you read on....you’ll see that God has to tell Abram some not-so-nice details about the future.

See before God's promises will be fulfilled (and they will be – God always keeps God's promises – there will be struggles and hardship.

DON'T SKIP OVER THAT PART.

For Abram (and more importantly his descendants – yep, those promised descendants) four hundred years is a long, long, LONG time to keep trusting.

It may feel like centuries when we're in the midst of our own "wilderness" on the journey.

But, what does God do?

God keeps the promises.

If it's God's will for you, or me, even though we have to wait and have to keep trusting and keep moving and keep following God through terrain and experiences that are NOT what we'd dreamed *we can imitate* Abram....(and don't forget, ladies, that his beloved wife Sarai is along for the WHOLE trip! Do NOT be discouraged into thinking this only works for the guys!)

We can imitate Abram and Sarai.

That's what these 40 days of Lent are about.

We're *given* (and annually re-given) this time to ask the tough questions and learn to trust our steps to God's path...and return to God with all our hearts...to realign our hearts with God's.

One SEPTILLION stars.

All put in place...

...each named by our Creator.

Don't you believe and trust that that same Creator has YOU (and me) in mind when we have tough questions?

When we think the journey of faith is too long or has too many twists and turns, let's remember that the One who set the stars in motion will guide us on our way.

Imitate Abram.

Go ahead and ask the questions!

And trust God to bring us to *our* promised land.

Amen!